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Elite Consensus and Political Polarization: Cases from Central Europe

Thomas A. Baylis*

Abstract: »Elitenkonsens und Politische Polarisierung: Fälle aus Mitteleuropa«. The concept of “elite consensus” is pivotal to the work of John Higley and his associates, but like many key political concepts its meaning is not precise. Consensus implies broad agreement, but just how much agreement, over what matters, among whom (i.e., who are the relevant elites), and how enduring remain to be specified. Higley et al. recognize these problems, placing their emphasis on procedural rather than substantive agreement and granting that individual cases may lie somewhere on the borderline between elite consensus and disunity. In this essay I explore the consensus issue by examining several cases from East Central Europe and that of Germany in the aftermath of the fall of Communism. Higley and Burton see especially in the Polish and Hungarian “roundtables” instances of near-contemporary “elite settlements.” But in both cases observers have recently pointed to a degree of political polarization whose intensity seems to call into question the actual achievement of elite consensus and indeed of “democratic consolidation.” I assess these apparently conflicting perspectives by examining the divergent views of the new political institutions and of the legitimacy of one another held by rival elites in Poland and Hungary and compare the cases of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Germany.

Keywords: elite, elite consensus, legitimacy, roundtables, Central and Eastern Europe.

Introduction

Elite consensus, John Higley and his collaborators have argued in numerous books and articles, is (along with “elite structural integration”) the necessary condition for the development of stable liberal democracy. Writing after the momentous political changes in Central and East Central Europe of 1989 and 1990, Higley and Michael Burton pointed to the cases of Poland and Hungary as examples of successful elite “settlements” – negotiated primarily in government-opposition “roundtables” – that they view as one of the three historical avenues to consensus (2006, 84-8; see also Higley and Lengyel 2000, 14-5). Yet by the middle of the first decade of the new century, numerous observers claimed that both countries (and others) had been afflicted to an alarming de-

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gree by the “polarization” of their politics (and, at least by implication, of their elites). It is the apparent tension between the concept of consensus and claims of polarization in these and related cases I propose to examine in this essay. The related cases, in which assertions of growing polarization have been to be sure less prominent, are those of Germany – which Higley and Burton treat as a paradigmatic case of elite “convergence” in the years after World War II, first in the West but presumably extended to the East after 1989 (2006, 150-4) – and of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, whose breakup in 1992 is said to have removed the most serious obstacle to convergence among elites in each (2006, 169-71). Elite convergence, in which some rival factions gradually recognize that their electoral interests are better served by cooperation and coalition-building than by uncompromising opposition, is for the two authors the second primary route to consensus. The third historical route, observed in certain cases of emergence from colonial rule, they see as no longer relevant for contemporary societies.

As with many all but indispensable terms of political analysis, the meaning of both “consensus” and “polarization” is anything but precise. Comparing consensus to the loosely related concept of “consent,” P. H. Partridge (1971, 73) writes that the former is “even more controversial and problematic ... There are the same types of difficulties in defining, identifying or locating it, and, as with consent, great difficulties in specifying and producing the evidence that demonstrates its existence.” V. O. Key (1961, 27) earlier characterized the concept as “nebulous,” and a “crutch,” and noted the rarity of inquiries into the “distribution among the population of whatever attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours constitute consensus.” The same observation could easily be applied to research on elites.

Just how much agreement, one might ask, does consensus require? Presumably the level lies somewhere between that of a bare elite majority and unanimity, but where? Over what matters, precisely? How enduring must the agreement in question be? (Temporary tactical accords are, one assumes, not sufficient.) Among which elite groups, and how and at what point in time are they so designated? Are there any reliable empirical indicators – elite opinion surveys, levels of political violence, numbers of successive, peacefully contested elections – for measuring consensus levels?

Higley and his co-authors address a number of these issues. First, unlike many who have written on the subject, they are concerned only with consensus among elites, which may or may not be accompanied or (in their view more likely) followed by popular consensus.¹ The relevant elites are identified on the

¹ Generally, Higley and Burton (2006, 3) argue that liberal democracy (and thus, one would think, mass consensus) is an “elite creation.” “A political elite whose members and factions are disposed toward mutually deferential and restrained political behavior always forms

basis of their institutional positions. They are required only to share a *procedural consensus*, agreement on the “rules of the game,” not on substantive policy goals or fundamental values. That consensus will be “mostly tacit” (Higley and Burton, 9); indeed, Higley and Burton observe that appearances are often deceptive – elites may either exaggerate or minimize their agreement on “basics,” depending on the political circumstances. Higley et al. stress that their “consensually unified elites” and “disunified elites” are Weberian ideal types, and that in practice there may be “imperfectly unified” elites in an “intermediate position” (Field and Higley 1980, 40). Once achieved, however, full elite consensus is almost always enduring (Higley, Burton 2006 and Field 1990, 425), although Higley and Burton now see contemporary Venezuela as an exception (2006, 78) and are troubled by signs of growing elite dissensus in the United States. Curiously, they do not see the American Civil War as evidence of a consensus breakdown (2006, 113-4).²

Not all the conceptual issues, of course, can be fully resolved. The extent to which procedural or institutional consensus can long be sustained in the absence of agreement on substantive matters remains questionable; elites experiencing repeated defeats on what they see as vital policy matters or core values are unlikely to continue to acquiesce easily in the mechanisms that legitimated those defeats. Particularly in situations of rapid institutional transformation, such as those that occurred in East Central Europe in 1989-1990, identifying the appropriate elite positions and their occupants may be difficult and subject to rapid change. If one of the elite negotiating partners is in retreat and the erosion of its authority continues or accelerates, any concessions it makes may soon come to be seen as inadequate. Moreover, not all potentially relevant elites may have participated in the presumed “settlement;” those that have not may not feel bound by it. Within the settlement, short-term tactical concessions may be mistaken for more fundamental levels of agreement.

“Polarization,” of course, poses analogous difficulties. How far apart, and on what matters, must the “poles” be – and are there just two poles, as the metaphor implies, or can there be multiple ones? To what extent is rhetorical excess – not uncommon in democratic polities – likely to be mistaken for uncompromising hostility? Again, what empirical indicators can provide reliable measures of the degree and intensity of polarization?

I cannot pretend to resolve all of these difficulties. But a useful approach to addressing them in a specific context may be to examine the attitudes of a range of elite actors toward fundamental political, social, and economic institutions and toward one another. To what extent do rival elites accept the institu-

before liberal democratic precepts and practices are adopted by any large number of citizens.”

² This raises the interesting question, which I cannot pursue here, of just what would constitute convincing evidence of an enduring breakdown of elite consensus.

tions as legitimate, or at least refrain from overtly challenging them? To what extent do such elites accept one another as legitimate participants in the political process? In a situation in which the institutions have been newly created, and elite positions and their occupants have recently emerged – such as East Central Europe since 1989 – the answers to those questions may be especially consequential.

Poland

The “Roundtable” talks held between February and April 1989 between representatives of the Communist government of Poland and the political opposition represented by Solidarity (and a less important “third side” of official unions and other organizations linked to the ruling party) were the first of several such negotiations that marked the crisis of East Central Europe’s Communist regimes and laid the institutional foundations for the new democratic, market-based systems that replaced them (Osiatynski 1996). The participants in the talks, at the time, would undoubtedly have been surprised to learn that they were engaged in shaping an enduring “elite settlement.” Communist negotiators were seeking to win broader support for necessary economic reforms without giving up essential political control, while Solidarity’s representatives were concerned primarily to establish the union’s own legality and to lay the groundwork for further-reaching democratization at a later stage. Both were surprised when the subsequent semi-free parliamentary elections and defections among the Communists’ presumed allies led to the formation of a Solidarity-led government.

Largely absent from the talks were hard-line Communists, who quickly became irrelevant in the new political order, and many more radical Solidarity (and church) leaders who were to play an increasingly important part in that order. Those leaders subsequently denied the legitimacy of much of the settlement, even speaking of “betrayal.” They viewed the agreement as an “elitist” (!) cabal, rejecting in particular the secularist bent of the new government, its liberal economic reforms, and its “thick line” approach to dealing with the Communist past. Their indignation grew when former Communists recaptured control of the parliament (in 1993) and then the presidency (1995). The several political parties that shared Solidarity roots split between those led by moderate reformers and ones dominated by their more radical critics, to the growing advantage of the latter (and, for a time, of the post-Communist SLD). Freedom Union, the party associated with most of Solidarity’s best-known intellectual reformers, itself suffered leadership fissures and faded into oblivion after 2001 (Bader and Zapart 2011, 262-3).

Somewhat inadvertently, the Roundtable and the events that followed it did establish the institutional framework for Poland’s “Third Republic.” Lech Wałęsa, while symbolically associated with the Roundtable (he did not, how-

ever, actively participate in it), arguably weakened the new institutional order through his attacks on the first Solidarity government under Tadeusz Mazowiecki and through his ill-considered attempts to push beyond the admittedly ambiguous limits of his authority as president. A new constitution, which was written while both the parliament and Presidency were led by the SLD, won the support of the Freedom Union; it appeared essentially to consolidate the post-1989 order. The document, however, was only narrowly approved in a 1997 referendum, thanks to right-wing and church opposition. Then in 2005 a right-wing post-Solidarity party, PiS (Truth and Justice), won both the parliamentary and presidential elections after promising to create a new “Fourth Republic” and write a new constitution; at one point it also called for the delegitimization of the post-Communist SLD, which had led the government between 1993 and 1997 and again from 2001 until 2005 (Brier 2009; Lang 2007).

At first glance, one would not think that the call by a victorious elite faction to outlaw the former governing party and scuttle a constitution approved only eight years earlier would be compatible with elite consensus, however defined. To be sure, lacking the requisite supermajority, the PiS was unable to carry out its agenda and the SLD had in any case been reduced to a shadow of its former self, partly through its own doing, following its immersion in a mire of alleged corruption and its own internal turmoil. The PiS-led governing coalition, dependent upon still more extreme rightist allies, the nationalist Self-Defence and the conservative Catholic League of Polish Families, came apart in 2007 and was defeated in new elections by its one-time anti-SLD ally, the more centrist, secular, and economically liberal Civic Platform (PO), also a Solidarity heir. Since then Polish politics has been dominated by the bitter rivalry of the two parties, personified by their leaders Jarosław and the late President Lech Kaczyński (PiS) and Prime Minister Donald Tusk (PO).

An institutional symbol of polarization in Poland has been the Institute for National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation, first established in 1998 but with its “lustration” powers greatly expanded in 2007 while PiS still governed. The requirement that all those with a “public function,” including academics, teachers, and journalists, complete a form stating whether or not they had collaborated with the secret police came under sharp attack and was ultimately invalidated by the Constitutional Court (Killingsworth 2010, 278-9). Publications of the Institute, claiming among other things that even Wałęsa had been a collaborator, also provoked angry responses (and a lawsuit by Wałęsa against President Kaczyński, who had repeated the charge). While most obviously meant to discredit the post-Communist SLD and its leaders, the Institute’s pursuit of lustration also challenged the legitimacy of other elite figures, as the case of Wałęsa suggests.

The tragic plane crash in Smolensk in April 2010 that took the lives of President Kaczyński and other members of the Polish elite only briefly moderated the divisive tone of the country’s politics (Bugajski 2011). Even the burial

of the President in the Wawel cathedral in Cracow, resting place of Polish kings and other heroes, provoked sharp criticism, and PiS leaders were vitriolic in criticizing the findings of the Russian investigation of the crash; they were particularly indignant at the suggestion that the President's own impatience might have contributed to the disaster. Jaroslaw Kaczyński, the President's brother and PiS head, who ran unsuccessfully to succeed him as head of state, soon reverted to highly polarizing rhetoric. In the view of a Polish journalist, the disaster produced in its wake "a regular civil war" over its moral interpretation, with Kaczyński accusing the Prime Minister of "treason" and co-responsibility for the accident (Buras 2011).

Hungary³

Conflict over the character of Hungary's new democratic system dates from its founding in 1989, and is rooted in still longer cultural patterns and historical experience. Although Communist reformers had initiated many of the political and economic changes ratified in the country's roundtable talks, and the non-Communist opposition was notably weaker and more divided than its Polish counterpart, those talks were more confrontational than the Polish ones (Bozóki 2002). The first non-Communist government, led by the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum and its leader József Antall, struggled against the consensus-oriented restraints imposed by the drastically revised constitution, seeking in particular to overcome what it saw as the hostility of the media and the resistance of the President and the Constitutional Court to its agenda. As Attila Ágh has argued (Ágh 2001), when conservatives recaptured control of the government in 1998, this time led by the (once liberal) Fidesz ("Young Democrats") and its supposedly "charismatic" leader Viktor Orbán, they sought again to centralize and "presidentialize" their rule, substituting a "majoritarian" (and arguably authoritarian) vision of democracy for the "consensual" one favoured by the Socialists – the successors to the former Communists. Employing the rhetoric of a "second revolution," Fidesz then and after leaving office in 2002 developed what one Hungarian analyst describes as a "second political culture, an alternative polity that established itself as a Hungarian version of the New Right" (Bozóki 2008).

Hungary's parliamentary elections of 2002 and 2006 were closely contested and, in the words of one commentary, characterized by "aggressiveness, friend-enemy thinking, and conspiracy theories going as far as accusations of spying" (Barlai and Hartlieb 2010, 88). Following their somewhat unexpected 2002 defeat, Orbán and Fidesz resorted to an "extra-parliamentary" strategy, creating

³ See also the chapter on Hungary by Lengyel and Ilonszki which is even more pessimistic about the lack of an elite consensus.

citizens groups with the name “Forward, Hungary” (inspired, it appears, by Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*) and emphasizing heavily the values of what they viewed as the “Hungarian nation.” Still deeper polarization has characterized the years since 2006. A critical turning point was the ferocious and in part violent reaction to the admission by Ferenc Gyurcsány, then the Socialist prime minister – in what he thought was a private party caucus meeting – that his party had “lied morning, noon and night” about the health of the Hungarian economy in order to win that year’s parliamentary elections (see Palonen 2009). Presumably Gyurcsány’s candour was meant to prepare the way for the introduction of painful austerity measures. But the publication of his remarks produced days of rioting, hundreds of injuries, and the storming of the state television station (Perczel 2006). Another round of rioting came a month later, set off by competing efforts to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1956 anti-Communist uprising. That anniversary was commemorated in separate ceremonies; Fidesz and the right refused to participate in the official event organized by the Socialist, i.e. post-Communist, government, on the grounds that those whose predecessors suppressed the uprising should not lead its celebration. The rival events culminated in right-wing violence, accusations of police brutality, and subsequent bitter recriminations (Csipke 2011, 117-24).

After eight years of Socialist-led governments, Orbán and Fidesz returned to power in 2010, this time with a two-thirds majority in parliament (a margin otherwise unheard of in the region’s new democracies). The backdrop for its massive victory was not only the continuing popular reaction against perceived Socialist duplicity, but the severity of the country’s actual economic woes, suffered in the context of the world financial crisis. Hungary’s difficulties required a European Union and IMF “bailout” and harsh domestic austerity measures. These, along with repeated allegations of corruption, made it impossible for the Socialists to recover, even after the replacement of Gyurcsány by the less controversial Gordon Bajnai. The implosion of the Socialists, who had led the country’s government for twelve of the twenty-one years since 1989, was underscored by the simultaneous rise of a party still more nationalist (and more alarming to its critics) than Fidesz: Jobbik, which finished a close third to the socialists (Spannenberger 2010).

The size of Fidesz’s majority was made possible by Hungary’s complex mixed electoral system. It converted the 52 per cent of the popular vote won by the party and its Christian Democratic partner into the two-thirds parliamentary advantage that allowed them to implement their agenda – a program of radical constitutional and political changes – without even nominal consultation with the weakened opposition. The centrepiece of Fidesz’s post-election program was the preparation of a new constitution, which was rushed to approval within a year of the 2010 elections (it is scheduled to take effect at the beginning of 2012). It is hardly a consensual document: both the Socialists and the vaguely liberal/“green” LDMP (“Politics Can Be Different”) refused to participate in its

formulation, convinced they could have no influence over its content, boycotted the parliament's vote on its approval (Jobbik members voted against it), and refused to recognize its legitimacy. For his part, Prime Minister Orbán praised the constitution as "the most important document for Hungary's national revival," and condemned the previous document – originally enacted in 1949 but almost entirely rewritten in 1989 and 1990 – as a "constitution of fiascos" (MTI [Hungarian News Agency], April 23, 2011). Other supporters claimed that the new constitution represented the final overcoming of Communism (Müller 2011). The government declined to submit the new text to a referendum; its selection of a Fidesz loyalist, Pal Schmitt, as President also assured there would be no resistance from that quarter.

Symbolically, the new document incorporates and celebrates Fidesz's conservative, nationalist, "Christian" ideology. Its extensive Preamble includes a "National Avowal of Faith" that invokes Hungary's Christian character and the heritage of the (medieval) "Holy Crown." The National Avowal of Faith is not just rhetorical: it is supposed to inform future interpretations of the Constitution. Other provisions enlarge and weaken the country's Constitutional Court and in the view of some could threaten the jurisprudence of the previous twenty-one years. The Constitution is made extremely difficult to amend and Fidesz appointees difficult to remove even after a future election. Together with other legislation, pushed through in a breakneck legislative schedule, it grants citizenship and possibly voting rights to ethnic Hungarians abroad and gives Fidesz appointees extensive supervisory authority over the media. Such provisions and the manner of the constitution's drafting and approval have not only provoked bitter domestic opposition but also criticism from neighbouring countries, notably Slovakia, whose own nationalists are fearful of the effects on that country's Hungarian minority, as well as from the European Parliament, U.S. State Department officials, and other foreign commentators.

The troubling tone of contemporary Hungarian politics is magnified by the rise of Jobbik and its close ties to the "Hungarian Guard" (outlawed in 2009 by a Budapest court but quickly reconstituted), which for many aroused memories of the fascist-era "Arrow Cross" movement. Both organizations are led by Gábor Vona, a 32-year-old former history and psychology student and teacher, although he shares the spotlight with Krisztina Morvai, a lawyer and university instructor and, ironically, one-time UN human rights employee. The party seems to have particularly strong appeal for the young, including the educated young; while also anti-Semitic the principal targets of its hostility are the Roma, whom it stereotypically blames for most Hungarian crime. Its "aggressive nationalism" outstrips that of Fidesz, and includes the rejection of the post-World War I Trianon treaty, which reduced Hungary to about one-third its earlier size and left millions of ethnic Hungarians outside its borders (Pelinka 2010; Kahlweit 2010; Vona 2010). Jobbik is highly critical of Fidesz on the

national level, seeing it as little better than the Socialists, but the two are said to have cooperated on the local level (Barlai and Hartleb 2010, 92).

When one considers the positions of what have been Hungary's two principal parties, evidence of underlying elite consensus is hard to find. The one, currently dominant, party in effect denies the legitimacy of the other; indeed, it has taken steps toward initiating criminal prosecution of the three previous Socialist Prime Ministers and their Finance Ministers "for mismanagement of public funds" (Eddy 2011). For their part, the Socialists refuse to accept the constitution forced through by its rival, especially the symbolism incorporated in it as well as parts of the institutional framework. When one adds the strength of the extreme right – Jobbik having won 16.7 per cent of the votes in the 2010 national elections – and its attacks on the elites of both of the other major camps, and considers the frequency with which politics (along with a uniformed rightist "guard") has moved into the streets and engendered violence in recent years, it is difficult to be sanguine about the condition of Hungarian democracy.

Czech Republic and Slovakia

As Higley and Burton (2006) point out, the conflict between Czech and Slovak elites over the institutions of their common state, and particularly over the division of authority between the national and republic governments, was effectively resolved by the "velvet divorce" of the two countries at the end of 1992. How much actual "elite convergence" has occurred in the two successor states is not as easy to assess, however. Differences among the major parties in the Czech Republic over the existing institutional framework or the substance of policy do not appear to go beyond those found in longer-established democracies, and the most serious right-wing extremist party has faded into near-oblivion. But since 1996 the country's governments have suffered from instability and at times stalemate, and the legitimacy of its third or (after 2010) fourth largest party has been challenged by some of its opponents.

That party is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which has won between 11 and 18 per cent of the popular vote in parliamentary elections but has been excluded from governing coalitions, one of the reasons stable governments have proven difficult to form. The KSČM is the successor to Czechoslovakia's former ruling Communist Party; it is regularly described as "unreconstructed," in part because of its refusal to shed its Communist name, in contrast to its Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, and East German counterparts. It has managed to survive in a difficult political context, one in which "anticommunism as a basic legitimization topos" early "became a defining element of the emerging Czech political culture," most notably in the debates over the country's controversial Lustration Act (Kopeček 2011, 256-60).

The Czech Senate has called for the KSČM to be outlawed, and within the centre-right coalition government that took office in 2010 the new “TOP 09” party has promoted the same objective. Under the Czech (and Slovak) constitutions parties that “threaten the basic democratic order” can in fact be banned (Novotny and Thieme 2010, 113), as they can under a similar provision in Germany’s Basic Law. A government report, however, has concluded that the courts would not be able to find sufficient grounds for doing so in the case of the KSČM (Richter 2011).

In fact, the party has largely worked within the Czech Republic’s constitutional framework, however outrageous occasional pronouncements of individual leaders (mostly having to do with the assessment of the party’s pre-1989 record) may appear to its critics. It has also cooperated with previous Social Democratic governments and either “tolerates” or participates in several regional governments led by that party. One suspects that the much-discussed possibility of a national Social Democratic government taking office that would be dependent on Communist support (Kopeček and Pšejka 2008), has something to do with proposals to outlaw the KSČM. In sum, as Higley and Burton (2006, 170) admit, “it is hard to identify a clear convergence – or, for that matter – an elite settlement” in the changes that have taken place among Czech elites.

Until 1998, there were few better examples of a polarized political system than that of Slovakia. As Higley and Burton (2006, 170) note, the country’s “elites were clearly disunited, and the regime was an illiberal democracy.” The autocratic and self-serving behaviour of Vladimír Mečiar, the country’s prime minister following its separation from the Czech Republic (except for a few months in 1994), and his bitter struggle against President Michal Kováč – including a bizarre attempt to kidnap the President’s son – mobilized the country’s more democratic and liberal forces against him. A broad anti-Mečiar coalition took power in 1998 and returned with a more pronounced centre-right orientation in 2002. Mečiar’s party (the HZDS) re-entered office in a supporting role in the government of Róbert Fico in 2006, an odd coalition of Fico’s leftist “Smer” – the successor to the Communist successor party the SDL’ – with the HZDS and the extreme nationalist SNS. Smer won by far the most votes in the 2010 parliamentary elections, but HZDS fell below the 5 per cent level required to win seats, and SNS barely scraped in with just 5.1 per cent of the vote. A new centre-right government replaced Fico’s.

The composition of the Fico government produced some discomfort in the European Union, and led to Smer’s temporary suspension from the EU’s Party of European Socialists. But the government did not depart as sharply as might have been expected from the policies of its predecessor, and the continuing (relative) economic success of Slovakia, underscored by its entry into the Euro zone, seemed to ease political tensions. The loss by Mečiar’s party of its parliamentary status and the weakening of the SNS has left Slovakia less visibly divided than its neighbours. To be sure, the issue of the loyalties of Slovakia’s

ethnic Hungarian population – the principal target, along with the Roma, of SNS demagoguery – has been revived owing to the Orbán government’s nationality law, sharply attacked by Fico (Schwarz 2010).⁴ But the external tensions with Hungary do not seem to have produced comparable domestic discord. It is also worth noting that the (indirect) Communist heritage of Smer does not appear to have produced the level of vitriol that has been directed at the successor parties in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Germany.

Germany

Higley and Burton (2006, 150-4) date the “convergence” of West German elites to the 1950s and 1960s, seeing the Social Democrats’ (SPD) Bad Godesberg conference of 1959 and still more the 1966-1969 Grand Coalition of the two largest parties as the events best symbolizing that convergence. They do not analyze the elite dimensions of the unification of the two German states in 1990 (see, however, Hoffmann-Lange 1998, 149-56). However, the thorough discrediting of the former Communist elite, the “transfer” of numerous West Germans to elite positions in the East and the emergence of new East German leaders from the ranks of former dissidents, “satellite” party members, and many who were previously politically uninvolved permitted a relatively smooth transition on the elite level. The success of a new Grand Coalition (2005-2009) under an East German Chancellor could be taken as renewed evidence of elite consensus. To be sure, the new “all-German” elite was dominated by its Western component (Yoder 1999; Yoder 2010; Bürklin, Rebensdorf et al. 1997). Elite surveys both before and after unification seemed to indicate broad acceptance of the Federal Republic’s “rules of the game;” surveys taken among the general public have been somewhat more ambiguous.⁵

Extremist right-wing parties have fared less well in German elections than their counterparts not only in East Central Europe but also than ones in other west European states, including Austria and predominantly German-speaking Switzerland (Steglich 2010). Where Germany does have something in common with its eastern neighbours is in the conflicting assessments of its Communist

⁴ Ethnic Hungarian parties have been part of Slovakia’s centre-right coalitions but not of Fico’s.

⁵ There is a sizeable literature that considers whether East Germans are less fully committed to “democratic” values than West Germans; it appears that they are somewhat more likely to associate democracy with social equality and less with individual rights. Eastern elites are said to differ less markedly from western ones in this respect. See, for example, Kaina (1997).

successor party, now *Die Linke* and formerly the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS).⁶

The PDS and *Die Linke* have operated with some success within the framework of the Federal Republic's political system. They have governed in coalitions with Social Democrats in the eastern states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg and the city of Berlin; for several years the PDS also "tolerated" an SPD minority government in Sachsen-Anhalt. Overall they have competed on roughly an equal level with the SPD and the Christian Democrats in the eastern *Länder* and eastern Berlin (in recent years lagging somewhat behind the CDU but ahead of the SPD); they have also established a modest foothold in a number of western states. Their possible participation in or support for governments has been pivotal in several recent state-level coalition negotiations; speculation over their possible participation in a federal coalition has cantered on a fairly distant future, in contrast to otherwise similar discussions in the Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, controversy about the very legitimacy of *Die Linke* as a participant in the Federal Republic's politics continues to be a persistent theme in the media and among politicians. Attacks from the centre-right parties (CDU/CSU and FDP) to be sure often appear to be instrumentalized weapons meant less to discredit *Die Linke* than to damage the SPD, which they accuse of dalliance with apologists for dictatorship. Less transparently partisan criticism has come from former dissidents – some of them within the SPD – and others who were victimized by the former regime and its notorious secret police, the Stasi. There is also a surprisingly large literature, some of it semi-scholarly in format, arguing that *Die Linke* does not satisfy democratic norms.⁷ In contrast to the assault on the KSČM in the Czech Republic, no credible attempt to outlaw *Die Linke* appears to be underway, in spite of occasional calls for such measures.⁸ But the party and many of its leaders do remain under surveillance by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*), another indicator of their incomplete acceptance as legitimate political players.

Die Linke's critics find ammunition for their attacks especially in the party's ambiguous programmatic commitment to "system change." By such change

⁶ *Die Linke* is the product of a merger between the largely eastern PDS and disaffected, largely western, trade unionists and Social Democrats; it also includes veteran members of more radical western groups) (Hough et al. 2007).

⁷ A particularly diligent critic has been the French writer Patrick Moreau, who has written or co-authored at least a half-dozen books on the subject, e.g. Moreau (2002).

⁸ Thus in August 2011 the General Secretary of the Christian Social Union (the Bavarian partner of the CDU) called for an examination of a possible prohibition, in response to statements by some Linke members justifying the construction of the Berlin Wall (*Spiegel-Online* August 8, 2011). Interestingly, *Die Linke* supports a ban on the extremist right-wing NDP, even though its fiercest critics have suggested using the constitutional provision that makes such a ban possible against itself.

Die Linke clearly does not mean any basic change in the Federal Republic's political institutions or rules (which it has by and large benefitted from), but modification of its system of property relations. The party's long-term objective is the replacement of "capitalism" by some form of "socialism;" the short-term means to this end is hotly disputed – how much nationalization of basic enterprises, what form public ownership or control might take, and so on. To my knowledge the Basic Law does not treat the Federal Republic's current economic order as inviolable; at the time it was written, after all, the Social Democrats themselves were committed to extensive nationalization. But debates within *Die Linke* on these issues, occasional individual statements by (mostly lower-level) party leaders that appear to defend or rationalize certain GDR policies or practices, and the periodic revelations linking various party leaders to the Stasi provide fuel for the critics. Germany's Commission for the Processing of the Stasi Archives (popularly the "Gauck" and later the "Birthler" Commission) has helpfully provided apparently incriminating information to the media, although it is less controversial than the Polish Institute of National Remembrance.

Conclusions

The level of disagreement among elites over the legitimacy of the political institutions introduced in 1989 and the ferocity of attacks on the right of opposing elites even to participate in public life at all offer a suggestive guide to the presence or absence of elite consensus in the new democracies of Central and East Central Europe. The approval in Hungary of a new constitution and other fundamental laws with the help of a two-thirds super-majority was premised on the repudiation of the constitutional order that had been in place for over twenty years and denial of the legitimacy of the Socialist-led governments that held power during much of that time. The Socialists, along with the smaller Politics Can Be Different party and many members of the country's intellectual elite in turn reject the validity of the new document and charge the government with serious abuse of the democratic process. In Poland, the institutions of the "Third Republic" have largely survived the attempt of the Kaczyński twins' PiS to replace it with a "Fourth Republic," but the partisans of the latter have not given up the fight. Commentators on Hungarian politics all but invariably speak of its severe "polarization," and the term also surfaces frequently in analyses of the Polish scene (see Wasilewski 2010). To be sure, the depth of elite hostility in Hungary, punctuated by the threat of the current governing party to prosecute the leaders of the former governing one, appears to go beyond that in Poland.

The common thread that links the Hungarian and Polish cases and in smaller degree those of the Czech Republic and Germany is that of anti-Communism – more precisely, the continuing and still effective exploitation of anti-Com-

munist themes as weapons of day-to-day politics. The now ostensibly Social Democratic successor parties of Hungary and Poland, the “democratic socialists” of *Die Linke*, and the less reformed KSČM of the Czech Republic are all identified by their elite critics with the crimes of the parties’ Communist-era predecessors, even though they have participated in conventional electoral politics for over two decades while commanding the support of significant portions of the population. More moderate parties, such as the SPD and Czech Social Democrats, that express some willingness to treat the successor parties as legitimate competitors and even possible coalition partners are attacked for doing so; in the cases of Poland and Hungary, the PiS and Fidesz (and Jobbik) condemn the entire political order that existed between 1989 and 2010 as still contaminated by the Communist past. Even Poland’s Civic Platform, itself a beneficiary of the reaction against the years of SLD rule, stands accused by the PiS of insufficient anti-Communist fervour. It seems to make little difference how comparatively moderate either the ruling parties actually were during the last years of the Communist era or the successor parties have been in the years since. The attacks on the reformist Hungarian Communists and their pragmatic Socialist successor as well as on the parallel Polish parties exceed in intensity those directed at the hard-line Czech and East German parties – possibly because of the greater electoral success of the former in the post-1989 period. Nevertheless, outrage over the fact that *Die Linke* and the KSČM continue to play a significant role in their countries’ politics is a persistent rhetorical theme for some critics – a quite genuine one especially for those who suffered under the old regime. For others it serves more instrumental purposes.

Is the strength of extremist parties of the right in Hungary and to a lesser extent in Slovakia also a sign of elite dissensus? Conversely, is the relative weakness of such parties in Germany and their decline in the Czech Republic and Poland a mark of growing elite consensus? Far right and other “populist” parties of course view themselves as opponents of the established elites, but to the extent they endure, win substantial followings and parliamentary seats, and even occupy governmental posts, their status as no more than alienated outsiders irrelevant to the question of a broader elite consensus may be subject to challenge. The rise of such parties is, of course, by no means confined to the former Communist world, nor is the phenomenon of polarization more generally, and demagoguery directed against immigrants and ethnic minorities sometimes extends into “respectable” elite ranks.⁹ But restricting our view to the five countries we have examined, at least the success of Hungary’s Jobbik and its ability to reinforce at a still more virulent level themes exploited by Fidesz has troubling implications for the prospects for building elite or societal consensus.

⁹ The daunting sales in Germany of an anti-immigrant book by Thilo Sarrazin (2010), former SPD and Federal Bank official, come to mind.

As many observers have pointed out, elite divisions in Hungary and Poland have deep cultural and historical roots – they are not a matter of simple rhetorical excess, the autocratic inclinations of particular politicians, or difficult but temporary economic circumstances. In Hungary the divide between “urbanist” and “national-populist” traditions has been dated back to the interwar period or even earlier (Palonen 2009, 322). In Poland devotion to conservative Catholicism reinforces the rural, southeast Poland basis of PiS support, as opposed to PO’s more secular and urban electorate, concentrated in western Poland, Warsaw and Łódź (Fils 2011). Czechoslovakia’s “velvet divorce” eliminated the source of the two successor countries’ most serious cultural division. Germany’s East-West divide, dating primarily from its Cold War political division and reinforced by the economic and cultural strains that accompanied state unification, helps account for *Die Linke*’s strength in the eastern states, but it has proven less damaging on the elite level. In all the countries considered, the gap between the “winners” and “losers” of the transition from Communism plays a role in electoral politics, especially in explaining the strength of far-rightist groups and to an extent that of the post-communists.

It seems fair to conclude that no definitive “elite settlement” has yet taken place in Hungary, and that the Polish Roundtable produced at best only a partial one which is still not shared by a significant section of the elite. Higley and Burton’s caution with respect to possible elite “convergence” in the Czech Republic and Slovakia still seems warranted. Their conviction, however, that Germany’s elite consensus persists also seems justified, in spite of the controversial status and disputed legitimacy of *Die Linke*. The larger lesson is that, given the inherent ambiguity of the concept of “elite consensus,” observers would be well-advised to be cautious about assigning it too quickly after a major political, social, or economic upheaval. Whether and when elite settlements and convergences have been definitively established are questions perhaps best addressed with the help of considerable historical perspective.

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